

Compton Basset Chapel
Upper Marlboro VICINITY
Prince Georges County
Maryland

HABS No. MD-135

HABS

M.D.

17. MARBURY

3A-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Baltimore District

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

Addendum To:
COMPTON BASSETT CHAPEL
(Clement Hill V, House)
16508 Marlboro Pike
Upper Marlboro
Prince George's County
Maryland

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PHOTOGRAPHS AND
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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

COMPTON BASSETT CHAPEL

HABS NO. MD-135

Location: On the property of Compton Bassett (HABS NO. MD-134), 16508 Marlboro Pike, Upper Marlboro, Prince George's County, Maryland

Present Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Sasscer

Present Use: Storage

Significance: The Compton Bassett Chapel is a rare intact example of an 18th-century private Catholic chapel building. Maryland had a fairly large Catholic population with a long history of persecution. Thus, unable to gather publicly for worship, they constructed private family chapels. As the early Catholic settlers migrated north into Prince George's County they brought this tradition with them. The legacy of small private family chapels continued after persecution had ended, and chapels such as these served as chapels of ease for the isolated plantations. The Compton Bassett chapel, which includes a sleeping chamber above for the visiting priest, is probably the only extant separate building of its type in Prince George's County.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The date of erection is unknown. Compton Bassett dates to ca. 1783. However, because the original house on this site burned in 1771, the chapel could pre-date the current dwelling. According to Effie G. Bowie in Across the Years in Prince George's County, the original owners of Compton Bassett in the early 1700s, Clement Hill and Ann Darnall Hill, were devout Catholics and had the chapel built for them.
2. Original and subsequent owners: See Compton Bassett, HABS NO. MD-134).
3. Builder: The chapel may have been built by/for Clement Hill, Jr., the original owner of the Compton Bassett property.

B. Historical Context:

Colonial Maryland was settled, by and large, by a Catholic population with a long history of persecution. Thus, having been forced to worship in the privacy of their own homes, they created private family chapels either within the main house or as separate structures adjacent (although services often included family and friends from neighboring plantations). When these early settlers from Southern Maryland migrated northward into Prince George's County they brought this tradition with them. Thus, long after the days of persecution, the wealthier Catholics living on large isolated plantations constructed private chapels as chapels of ease. Only this one and one at His Lordship's Kindness are known to exist. The chapel at Compton Bassett, however, is a separate structure while the chapel at His Lordship's Kindness is in a hyphenated wing of the main house. The chapel at Compton Bassett is also unique in that interior features of the chapel, such as the altar platform and communion rail, are intact.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Compton Bassett chapel is a rare example of a private Catholic chapel, perhaps the only such structure extant in Prince George's County. It is relatively simple in its styling, being a one-and-a-half story brick structure with simple Georgian detailing.

2. Condition of the fabric: The chapel appears to be in good to fair condition. Much of the original fabric is intact including the communion rail, stairway, etc. although it is in need of repair, and elements, such as the cracking plaster, require maintenance.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The chapel is a one-and-a-half story, three-bay-by-two-bay (one bay on the north side) brick structure with a side-gabled roof. It measures approximately 24' x 16' and has a full cellar.

2. Foundations: It rests on a brick foundation.

3. Walls: The walls are of brick construction in a

seemingly random pattern (all header gable ends, areas of common bond, a few rows of headers and a few of stretchers, etc.) There is a molded-brick water table at the front.

4. Structural system, framing: The chapel is of load-bearing brick construction.

5. Porches: There are no porches currently. Four wooden steps lead directly up to the front entry. The steps, etc. are missing from the side entry.

6. Chimneys: There is an exterior brick chimney at the south side gable end.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The entry is to the north side of the east-facing front facade and has a four-panel door, flanked by recessed-panel pilasters with a semi-circular fanlight above (this doorway is a simplified version of the doorway at the west elevation of the main house). There is also a doorway just around the corner at the north side, with a six-panel door with a plain wooden surround and a brick lintel. To the center of this wall, at ground level, is a vertical board door into the cellar.

b. Windows: The typical window is a nine-over-nine-light sash window with a plain wooden surround and a brick lintel (the lintel of the windows at the south end of both the front and rear are arched while the others are flat). At the north side, there are no windows in the first story and one, six-over-six-light sash window to the center of the half story. Also in the south end, there is a four-light casement window to either side of the chimney block. A former basement window to the center of the front facade has been bricked over.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The chapel has a side-gabled roof covered with wooden shingles.

b. Cornice, eaves: There is a plain, narrow box cornice, void of ornament. There is only a flat board along the eaves of the gable ends, with no overhang.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

a. First floor: The first floor is one large room with the altar and communion rail to the south wall, in front of the fireplace. To the side of the front entry along the north side wall is a doorway into the boxed stairway. There is also a separate exterior entry on the north wall so that the upstairs could be entered without going through the interior of the chapel.

b. Second floor: This, again, is one open room, with low knee-walls, and open to the roof (a half-story room). There is a fireplace on the south wall (mantel missing).

c. Cellar: There is a full cellar with a relieving arch under the upstairs chimney.

2. Stairway: The stairway is boxed, steep and narrow and runs along the north-side wall.

3. Flooring: The floors are wood on the first and second stories and brick in the cellar.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are plaster on the first and second stories (cracking in the second) and brick in the cellar (unfinished foundation walls).

5. Decorative features, trim: The altar platform and communion rail are still intact.

D. Site: The chapel sits on a slight rise among a cluster of trees, facing northeast onto the circular drive in front of the main house at Compton Bassett (to the north).

PART IV. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views: Two views were previously taken by HABS of the chapel in 1936. One, a perspective view from the northeast of the front and side, was taken by photographer Delos Smith. Another, a view from the north of the front elevation, was taken by John O. Brostrup.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Cook, Margaret W. and Peggy Burns Weissman.
National Register of Historic Places
Inventory--Nomination Form for Compton
Bassett, prepared in 1976 and 1980.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Bowie, Effie Gwynn. Across the Years in Prince
George's County. Richmond, Virginia: Garrett
& Massie, Inc., 1947.

Virta, Alan. Prince George's County: A Pictorial
History. Norfolk, Virginia: Donning
Publishing Company, 1984.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of Compton Bassett, Chapel was undertaken as part of a cooperative project between the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission on behalf of the Prince George's County Historic Preservation Commission (HPC), to document select sites throughout the county. A memorandum of agreement was signed in August of 1988 and the project, to span one year, began in January of 1989. The site selection was made by Gail Rothrock, director and Susan G. Pearl, research historian, of the HPC. They also provided access to their historical research and other information on file with the HPC, as well as their extensive knowledge of Prince George's County history. The large format photography was undertaken by HABS photographer, Jack E. Boucher. The historical report was prepared by Catherine C. Lavoie, HABS historian who also accompanied the photographer into the field for on site investigation.